

Rural Tech Challenges Vary

By [Ian Quillen](#) on July 21, 2010 2:05 PM |

Not only are the technology challenges of rural schools far different from urban ones, but the challenges of rural schools aren't exactly uniform themselves, three state superintendents said Wednesday at the [National Rural Education Technology Summit](#).

In North Carolina, schools chief June Atkinson said one of her biggest battles is convincing parents and teachers that it's OK for students to learn virtually on their own schedule and read books on computer screens instead of bound pages. In New Hampshire, schools chief Virginia Barry said it's difficult reining in a large number of forward-thinking districts to use technology to accomplish uniform, statewide goals.

And in South Dakota, where more than half of about 150 districts have fewer than 300 students, state superintendent Tom Oster said that distance had forced most residents to embrace online learning, but that the state—with only 123,000 PreK-12 students—is too small to independently fund research to support effective online learning.

"We don't have enough students in our states to develop these types of things in a vacuum," said Oster, speaking on behalf of several states. He added that those less-populated states are hoping the common academic standards movement will spark some collaborative research.

But South Dakota has some organizational advantages. It's less daunting, for example, to organize a project there utilizing prison inmates to wire every public school for Internet access. That 1990s effort laid the groundwork for every state public school campus to have broadband, Oster said. Of course, as with many school technologies, those connections are becoming slower and more out of date without proper maintenance and updating, he said.

In all three states, the superintendents said the biggest task is integrating technology into rural homes, not rural schools, whether in South Dakotan American Indian reservations, the swamplands of North Carolina, or New Hampshire's mountain villages. And while seizing on students' increasing use of mobile technologies offers some potential for greater technology use, even that has its own set of potential difficulties.

"The challenge has been to ensure that platform would be available through all kinds of multiple devices," Atkinson said. "To make sure that every child has that one-to-one [computing experience] is another cost factor."

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